**Endurance, Aesthetics, and the Everyday: Chhou in Purulia**

## Background

Chhou, a masked, war-themed, epical dance-drama, widely practised in Purulia, is celebrated, in present days, as the quintessential symbol of West Bengal's folk culture. But it actually originated in the undivided Manbhum district. Although, different forms of Chhou still prevail in Seraikella (Jharkhand) and Mayurbhanj (Orissa), as also in other districts of Bengal like Bankura and Medinipur, it has primarily been associated with the traditional past of Purulia in particular, and West Bengal in general.

With folklorist Ashutosh Bhattacharya's relentless efforts, Chhou surpassed its local boundaries, emerging as a significant exotic attraction in the Western world. Chhou's growing public visibility also placed it at the centre of Bengal's academic folk-discourses in the second half of the 19$^{th}$ century. While Bhattacharya's discursive representations juxtaposed Chhou's exotic past with its civilizational Hindu traits, many indigenous authors and cultural activists like Pashupati Mahato have constituted it as an important political tool in propagating a pan-Jharkhandi tribal-cultural consciousness (Chatterji 2009, Mahato 2004).

Such multiple dialogic registers have expanded Chhou's literary, as well as non-literary public sphere, constituting it as an open and composite dance-form, which could be shaped according to diverse cultural-political interests and ideologies. Chhou has been fitted into diverse contexts like Republic Day celebrations, Asian Games inauguration, religious festivals, etc. (Shatpathy, 2008). Today, Chhou has also achieved a form of commercial viability. Images of Chhou dancers are used in hoardings for State-sponsored cultural events. Chhou also gets featured in television commercials and promotional videos.

My initial research aim was to explore the symbolic and experiential aspects of Bengal's folk/ ritual masks. Considering its wide social access and elaborate practice of using masks, Chhou seemed to be the most plausible ethnographic choice. However, as I started my fieldwork, I came to know that Chhou masks do not have any ritual functions today, nor do they hold any particular significance in dancers' social, personal or emotional lives. Moreover, contrary to what I had imagined, Chhou masks' transformative functions are not independent of the overall aesthetic complex of the dance form, to which my analytic focus shifted gradually.

## Research Objectives

I realized that a disciplinary discourse of rhythm and movement patterns, songs, and aesthetic imagination, intertwines interestingly with a dancer's spontaneous, affective subjectivities. I also observed how dancers describe Chhou as complexly rooted in and shaped by their everyday experiences of strength, endurance, anxiety, pain, pleasure, and suffering.

My primary research objectives, thus involved analysing aesthetic details on one hand, and exploring how dancers' aesthetic and everyday subjectivities intertwine, on the other. Thus, I locate Chhou at the liminal space between aesthetic and mundane, discourse and experience, transcendence and immanence. I theoretically engage with the philosophy of

Indian rasaesthetics, western critical/ post-modern dance studies, popular cultural literatures, and anthropologies of everyday life, senses and emotions, as also ethnographies on suffering and agency. My approach has been a phenomenological one, constituting dancers' lived bodily experiences as major analytic grounds.

**Field**

I concentrated mostly on the Baghmundi region, which is considered as the birthplace of Chhou. Located at a distance of only 18km from Ajodhya hill range, Baghmundi has an interesting topography. She is encircled with mighty mountains, and dotted with several forest ranges like Matha, Duarshini, Sonkupi, etc. Most of the rivers that cut across this region are rain-fed, thus remaining dry for most part of the year. Due to delayed and uncertain monsoons and increased deforestation in recent times, annual average summer temperatures remain very high. Winters are also warm and extremely dry, but as temperatures fall, nights seem pleasant.

Baghmundi villages, like Torang, Sindhri, Gobindapur, Madla, Beergram, Ryareng Taar, etc. where I carried out my fieldwork, are characteristically similar. They have vast rice and vegetable fields surrounded by mountain ranges, divided into separate plots by dyke like constructions, village pond which supplies water to the fields and is also used for bathing, and mud huts with spacious courtyards built along wide lanes covered with red dust. Concrete houses, which are rare, generally represent higher socio-economic status. Stationary or clothe shops, dispensaries or food/ tea stalls are few in number; they remain open throughout the day, but shut down in the evening.

Most of the dancers in Baghmundi are farmers. During daytime, they remain busy working in the fields, sowing seeds, preparing soil or pulling out weeds. During harvesting season, dried grains are cut and arranged into bundles, before they are threshed either manually or by machines. The rice grains, once separated from the stalks are boiled in large bowls, and later dried in sunlight to enable proper removal of grain husks. Women take part equally in all these different farming processes with their male partners. In the evening, dancers assemble at the *ustad's* place, to discuss different Chhou-related matters or rehearse their newly-formed dance-dramas.

Although agriculture provides food security, it is not a stable source of income. Many dancers are thus engaged in other professions that generate money. In rural Purulia, caste membership still impacts choice of occupations. The Kumars of Gobindapur make furniture, while the Kuiris of Madla are involved in small scale businesses. The Sutradhars of Chorida, however, earn solely by making masks and clay idols. Some of the poorer castes, who do not own lands, work as daily wage labourers in others' farms, or work as construction workers in both government and private projects (schools, roads, tourist lodges, etc.).

I also worked in Bamnia in Jhalda block. Compared to Baghmundi, Jhalda is drier, does not have much cultivable land, is more congested, and looks like an over-crowded colony with overlapping houses, shops, and open drains. Jhalda dancers are mostly engaged in *bidi*-making industry. There is a significant economic disparity between the dancers of

Baghmundi and Jhalda, in terms of food security, because the former are producers, while the latter have to buy their food, hence, earning for them becomes important.

**Contesting Aesthetic Topographies**

Within a few months of my fieldwork, I found out that there are serious contestations among dancers, over the proper way of understanding, practising and relating to Chhou aesthetics. Dancers are divided into two broad categories; the *purana* (old/ traditional) and *notun* (new/ contemporary). While the former tends towards preserving traditional aesthetic patterns, emphasizing a strict disciplinary learning process, the latter engages in stylistic improvisations, displaying clear subversive traits.

Seniors claim that the recent developments have been products of growing commercialization, fame-hunger and discursive laxity. They think that the young dancers learn Chhou by 'seeing' (*dekhe shekha*) i.e. by observing senior dancers' performances, without the proper guidance of a guru (*guru diye shekha*). This distinction also implies populist stylistic inclination towards visual primacy, unlike traditional Chhou's discursive emphasis on sonic immersion.

Traditional-populist binary is interestingly shaped according to a team's interpretations of its own position in a particular socio-cultural sphere and public/ academic discourse. Traditionalists' urge to preserve Chhou's exoticism is shaped out of a sense of integrity towards the academic and institutional recognition they have always enjoyed. Populists, however nurture a sense of deprivation in this regard, and try to formulate aesthetic legitimacy through local visibility.

**Chapter Divisions**

My thesis is divided into two broad parts. The first, deals, in details, with Chhou's traditional aesthetics, with its subsequent changes. The second explores the different experiential registers of everyday life including labour, human-environment relationships, and dancers' subjective interpretations of social suffering and well-being.

**Chhou Aesthetics-**

**Chapter 1: *Bhava-jukta shoreer:* Traditional Chhou aesthetics**

The first chapter analyses how a *bhava-jukta shoreer* or an aesthetic body is constituted through rigorous discursive processes of sensory and intellectual cultivation. Chhou draws heavily from Indian classical philosophy of transcendence grounded in a discourse of bodily refinement, which surpasses mundane human body, emotions, and consciousness. Important works on aesthetics and transcendence like that of F. A. Marglin (1990), who discusses the performative contexts of Devdasi dance in Orissa, or that of P. B. Zarrilli (2000), who explores the body-refining techniques in case of Kathakali, have conceptualized mastering of patterned kinaesthetic codes as important modes of aesthetic transformation. Too much emphasis on discursive cultivation, however, locates a performer as a disembodied being, or what Kathy Foley calls an 'empty vessel', to be filled with aesthetic emotions (1985: 38).

Contrary to such theoretical positions, I try to show how Chhou, in conjunction with its disciplinary structure, also incorporates dancers' subjective ways of thinking, feeling and interpreting, making room for a reflexive assessment of how a performance can touch and be rooted in different aspects of mundane life and consciousness. I argue that Chhou significantly defies classical tendencies of what Arindam Chakrabarti refers to as an extreme de-personalization of lived human emotions (2018), by occupying an unstable ground between discourse and experience.

Learning Chhou presupposes a sensuous internalization of sound and movement patterns through a process of aesthetic imagination, which is both discursively embodied and affectively experienced by the dancers. Imagining or invoking a deity-*bhava* requires cultivating a musically responsive body, which has embodied rhythms not as mere external auditory cues, but as internally felt realities. What dancers call *chhonder kolpona* or rhythmic imagination, is grounded in the ways they feel the deities within their own bodies. Thus, imagining, for Chhou dancers, does not indicate a psychological process, marked with doubt and falsity, but a way of sensuously experiencing what is achieved through learning.

Dancers gather knowledge about the lives and stories of the deities through reading of religious texts, listening to stories and also learning *jhumurs* or the narrative songs, which contains brief sketches of dramatic epical events. According to the traditionalists, knowing a story prepares the ground for sensory realization of an aesthetic emotion, or what they call gaining *anubhav* or a feeling state through *abhigyata* or experiential knowledge. I hereby draw from Charles Hirschkind's concept of attentive listening as a significant way of embodying knowledge within inner sensory habits (2006). Thus, knowing, experiencing and imagining form interrelated realities for Chhou dancers. I agree, in this respect, with what Sukanya Sarbadhikary conceptualizes as 'imagination as experience', in her exposition of Vaishnava religious practices (2015: 76).

The major analytic thrust, in this chapter, is thus, on the complex overlaps between the concepts of discourse and experience, emotions and affect, learning and feeling, knowing and believing. Besides aesthetic complexities, I also document how dancers narrate their subjective transcending experiences. While some perceive dance and music as a form of 'divine calling', others describe how dancing experiences constitute an extraordinary emotional state, where earthly concerns, physical exhaustion, and sorrows are temporarily suspended. But, it is important to note that these transcending pleasure experiences are described by dancers as grounded in their mundane self, body, thoughts and emotions, thereby smothering the distinctive lines between the aesthetic and the mundane.

**Chapter 2: *Rongin* Chhou: The Contemporary Aesthetics**

The next chapter explores how the new-age dancers have innovatively remodelled Chhou by breaking through traditional format and expanding Chhou's aesthetic boundaries to diverse populist cultural elements.

In the new format, frequent aggressive and vigorous movements reduce the significance of *chhonde chola* or 'walking in rhythms', resulting in an apparently

unstructured or arrhythmic exhibition of physical strength, moving away from what anthropologist Stefan Helmreich describes as an 'immersive experience' (2007), which forms the basis of aesthetic mood formation in traditional Chhou discourse. Age-old *jhumurs* or *rongs* are being replaced with Bollywood or *baul* songs. Chhou has traditionally been a *nirbak* or 'silent' dance-drama, but lately, a practise of dramatic scripted narrations, has been incorporated. The rhythmic continuity is broken during the enactments of emotive voiceovers as the musical instruments stop suddenly, creating an interim, unmusical space. Other changes include introductions of female roles, incorporating non-epical themes like social issues, etc.

What I try to analyse through detailed documentations of these changes, is the complex shift from aesthetics of sensory-auditory immersion to that of an emphatic bodily exhibitionism, or what Janet Wolff calls 'explosion to visibility' (1997: 84). I conceptualize such tendencies through the different post-modern and critical dance theories. I argue that incorporation of ordinary human-like movements, denying rhythmic precisions, making human strength and exhaustions apparent through repeated jumps and forceful landings, exaggerated masks, bright clothes and jewelleries, inclusion of populist traits, etc. can be understood as a strategic denial of traditional Chhou's inherent classical tendencies, dismantling the conceptual boundaries between the divine and the mundane. Thus, populist dancers' innovative attempts implicate both transgression of divine grace and aesthetic propriety. Breaking through discursive stringencies can become a crucial way of what Ann Cooper Albright describes as physical assertion of human 'aliveness' within a performance, defying codes of abstractions (1997).

It is, however, imperative to acknowledge that the traditionalist-populist binaries are not mutually exclusive categories. Traditionalists' stress on aesthetic precision foregrounds a transcendental ideology, but does not deny dancers' affective subjectivities. Similarly, the populists do not completely break through traditional aesthetic patterns, but engage in interrelated processes of negotiation and change. What thus becomes important is exploring how populist dancers themselves create boundaries, reflect upon their relationships with dance, and narrativize the interconnections between aesthetic and social registers.

**Phenomenology of Everyday Life-**

**Chapter 3: *Mota Shoreer*: The Natural Body**

Chhou dancers' everyday experiences are largely built upon their understandings of an organic relationship between nature and human body, with which their aesthetic and social subjectivities interact in diverse ways. Body's naturalism is imagined in terms of the concept of '*mota'* or thick/ coarse, which constitutes the phenomenological ground marking Chhou's aesthetic distinctiveness from refined Classical forms on one hand and the uniqueness of a socially backward, rural life, vis-à-vis urban culture and lifestyles, on the other.

The third chapter analyses how *mota*, as both a discursive and an experiential category, constitutes ways in which dancers imagine Chhou, everyday life and nature to form an interactional complex. It implies aesthetic, social and material unrefinedness, which

constitutes rural subjectivity as a function of natural or basic animalistic life-conditions. Thus, unlike Western dualistic schemes, Chhou dancers' perceptions of nature-human relationship are grounded in what Edvard Hviding calls a 'non-dichotomising ontological premise' (1996: 171).

*Mota* defines dancers' everyday activities, clothing patterns, dietary habits, etc. in terms of an ethics of minimum socio-material refinedness and basic necessity. Dancers emphasize what Pierre Bourdieu, in his social critique on aesthetic judgement, defines as 'function', rather than 'form' (1979). Dancers' imagination of *mota* is grounded in how they experience their bodies to be in constant visceral engagements with nature through relatively unmediated orificial openings like skin pore, mouth, nostril, anus, etc. through ordinary activities like eating, bathing, defecating, etc. It is imperative to understand how *mota* also constitutes dancers' diverse experiences of triumph and anxiety. While many younger dancers celebrate *mota* lifestyle as a way of subverting social hierarchies, elders consider it as a non-agentive condition of social backwardness and deprivation. I argue that the concept of *mota* smothers the boundaries between nature and culture, body and society, aesthetics and senses, and mark different ways of understanding the integral connection between aesthetic and everyday life.

**Chapter 4: *Dukher Shoreer*: The Labouring Body**

My field engagements eventually disclosed that for Chhou dancers, an aesthetic body, in terms of its strength and enduring capacities, is not a mere function of discursive training practices, but is complexly interwoven with and grounded in their mundane life-worlds. Agricultural labour and other strenuous activities like carrying fuel woods, climbing mountains, etc. as well as continual exposures to extreme climatic patterns, are thought as important conditions that enhance bodily endurance. Dancers describe this active, labouring body, viscerally entangled with external environment and manual labour as '*dukher shoreer'*, which constitutes the primary analytic of my fourth chapter.

'*Dukhi'* is the Bengali adjective for '*dukh'* or sadness, whereas, '*dukhna'*, in Hindi, means 'being in physical pain'. Considering the wide influence of Hindi on rural dialect of Purulia, the latter use does not seem improbable. Also, unlike Bengali *dukh*, *dukhna* has more direct bodily connotations. But it is interesting, how dancers subvert the literal implications of the term by narrating physical exertion or suffering as a significant cause of mental well-being, moral integrity and aesthetic excellence. I argue that, for dancers, who live under diverse conditions of socio-economic and climatic uncertainties, continual visceral activations provide a sense of bodily aliveness and certainty, which forms the ground upon which their socio-moral agencies are constituted. Manual labour, as Sydney Mintz, in his seminal study on Caribbean labour history has conceptualized, might become a way of achieving authority over one's body and life-world, under conditions of socio-economic deprivations (2006, 2011). My primary task in this chapter is to analyse how physical suffering, socio-moral well-being, and ideas of bodily agency intertwine through the ways in which labouring practices are embodied and interpreted by Chhou dancers.

It is important to note that both dance and labour presupposes continual, painful processes of bodily cultivation, which increases physical endurance, as well as create junctures of transcendence. Dancers' experiences and understandings of dance and everyday life are predicated upon these interconnected processes of transcending and dwelling in mundane bodily capacities. Thus, I conceptualize bodily pain and endurance as important experiential registers through which a dancer simultaneously breaks through and embodies his mundane self and sensibilities.

**Chapter 5: *Koshto, Ananda,* Chhou: The Silent, Sharing Body**

The last chapter foregrounds the question of pain and suffering, attending to its social, emotional and subjective implications. Unlike many contemporary authors like Ian Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman (2016), who have conceptualized social suffering as a form of infringement leading to human passivity and loss of agency, I explore how dancers themselves perceive it as an integral part of their social selves, constituted through their emotional experiences of hope, anxiety, and well-being. Following Veena Das's analysis (2007), I conceptualize the everyday as a dynamic site, which enables the formation of diverse ways of inhabiting and relating to conditions of physical and social suffering.

Following Saba Mahmood's exposition of human agency in the context of women's participation in Islamic movements in Egypt, I argue that the boundaries between suffering and well-being are highly unstable. By attending closely to dancers' subjective stances and interpretations, I challenge the liberalist tendencies of naturalizing 'human subjectivity' as solely bound to voice, painlessness, and freedom. I, rather, conceptualize it as a contesting site, where diverse meanings of hope and despair, voice and silence, action and passivity, strength and weakness are shaped. Suffering, for Chhou dancers, is not merely state of degrading human passivity and silence, but a life-long process of succeeding and failing, hoping and trying, suffering, yet persisting. Anthropologists Michael Jackson (2011) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) have analysed this continual mundane engagements through the concept of 'endurance', which presupposes a relentless and passionate desire to live, adjusting within the limits of life.

This chapter also acknowledges how Chhou features in dancers' hopes, dreams, efforts, and aspirations. I have documented multiple ways in which dancers constitute their agentive social selves by creating self-reflective and dialogic spaces, which unleash scopes of addressing and dealing with anxieties, weaknesses, and limits of actions, as also create possibilities of change and achievements. Chhou rehearsal sessions, which become a mode of exchanging aesthetic knowledge inter-generationally, are important spaces in this regard. Pleasure and self-worth can also be experienced very personally through passionate engagements with dance and music. Chhou might also become vehicles of expressing suppressed voices through dynamic kinaesthetic possibilities as we observe in case of the populist dancers. Here, I concur with Judith Hamera's concept of dance as an 'articulate reality' (2002), which constitutes ways of subverting social hierarchies. Performances also expand scopes of increased social interactions, mobility, and self-esteem, which grant dancers a sense of ownership over their own lives.

The primary task of this chapter, thus, is to explore how dancers' ordinary ways of dealing with conditions of social suffering are intertwined with their aesthetic understandings. The everyday, here, is conceptualized as an important site, where social subjectivities are constituted through continual processes of endurance, negotiations, and change.

**Methodology**

My methodological engagements involved an intense sensory absorption in dancers' aesthetic and mundane worlds. Besides acquiring discursive knowledge, it was also important to direct my ethnographic attention to my own bodily responses through immersive involvements in live performances, rehearsals and demonstration sessions. I practised concentrating on how my body reacted to auditory impulses through uncontrollable tremors, increased heartbeats, rhythmic clapping of hands or twisting sensations in stomach. Continual musical engagements located me on similar experiential planes with the dancers, exposing me, through my own bodily understandings, to their inner sensory realms, which defied linguistic articulations.

My methodological decisions were also shaped by the ways I was received by my interlocutors. My identity as an urban researcher, made me distant from natural life and somatic culture of rural Purulia, in the eyes of the dancers. I, thus, consciously engaged in activities like walking long distances enduring summer heat, wearing light clothes in winter, helping dancers in their farming or spending hours outside to attain maximum sensory exposures. This helped me come closer to dancers' life-worlds, through inter-subjective somatic understanding of pain, exhaustion and endurance. Thus, the processes of getting involved in my interlocutors' socio-personal lives and achieving intensive analytical knowledge, were integrally intertwined through auto-ethnographic somatic attentiveness.

**Conclusion**

My thesis attempts at exploring the fluid boundaries between aesthetic and mundane subjectivities, challenging the discursive tendencies of conceptualising the former in terms of a transcendental reality. Through detailed ethnographic explorations, I show how aesthetic emergences are deeply rooted in mundane consciousness. I conceptualize transcendence and immanence as interrelated experiential categories, embodied in contexts of aesthetic performance, as well as mundane activities like labour. I argue that human bodily subjectivity, with its entire sensory modalities, is the ultimate ground where experiences of transcendental pleasures and immanent suffering and endurance fold into each other. I try to look into the ways dancers experience, interpret, and narrate their relationships to the complex intertwining of aesthetic and mundane realities.

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